

Review: Joseph Patrick Ganahl: corruption, good governance, and the African state: a critical analysis of the political-economic foundations of corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Joseph Patrick Ganahl (2013), *Corruption, Good Governance, and the African State: A Critical Analysis of the Political-Economic Foundations of Corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Potsdam: Potsdam University Press, ISBN 9783869562483, 300 pp.

For more than two decades, corruption and good governance have been well-worn staple subjects of both analysis and development cooperation. In this book, Joseph Ganahl has sought to add to this sizeable literature by assessing the dominant discourse on corruption and good governance upon which the standard fix of the World Bank is based. He has countered this discourse with an attempt to start from the real conditions upon which, in his view, “African” politics and state structures are based. It is from these, rather than from a transfer of “Western” concepts and structures, that Ganahl believes a salubrious perspective for Africa’s future can best be constructed. As his empirical frame of reference, the author takes “Africa” wholesale, in the sense of “Africa south of the Sahara”, but excludes South Africa.

One may say that Ganahl does a good job in summarizing (for the umpteenth time) the approach of the World Bank in its various phases and critiquing its technocratic and abstract tenets, as well as the destructive consequences of programmes ordained by the Bank and by the IMF. When turning to the “Logic of African Politics” (ch. 5), the author has little more in the way of surprises. He summarizes the equally well-worn concept of neopatrimonialism and underscores how development assistance has, in many cases, worked as a functional equivalent for rents that were not forthcoming due to a lack of natural resources or their crises. Also in keeping with this discussion and basically in the vein of economic neo-institutionalism, Ganahl harps on about the many defects that African states and polities display when confronted with the “Western model”. The latter is presented not only as the means by which, in the “West”, functioning nation-states could be built but also, by silent implication, as the empirical reality of these states. This is bolstered by repeated but unsubstantiated assertions that corruption in “Africa” is on a completely different and much larger scale than in the “West”. One may wonder how this claim jibes with recent large-scale scandals within the top brass of Siemens and Deutsche Bank – to mention just two German instances, with the level of tax evasion in the “West” or with the ruling to uphold the Citizens United decision in the United States Supreme Court, which effectively allows corporations to “buy” elections. Social scientists who fail to read the daily papers run the risk of losing touch with such realities. Awareness of these realities would lead to the insight

that large-scale corruption cases in the “West” actually easily exceed the budget of many smaller states in “Africa”. Nevertheless, corruption does of course pose a very serious problem, and Ganahl relates this to the issue of the “public” or “national interest”, which, in the “West” is working towards a readiness of citizens to pay taxes and of officials not to be bribed, while in “Africa” it is splintered by sectional interests, clientelism, regionalism and patronage. Again, the daily papers would inform Ganahl that, also in the “West”, deputies are evaluated largely according to what they deliver to their constituencies, and that the metaphor of the “cake” (137, 228) from which each strives to take a piece is present in public discourse, not only in “Africa” but also in countries such as Germany. This is not meant to deny the problems Ganahl seeks to address. However, his perspective is distorted by his dichotomous vision, which views the “West” largely through the rose-tinted glasses of ideal-type constructions. Ganahl, as well as others, mistakes such constructs for reality, while actually they were conceptualized as functional relationships, as Max Weber – the originator of the notion – has expounded at length.

Such distortion is not helped much by accounts of state formation in the “West” and the well-known argument about the generation of a state economically based on taxes by the exigencies of war-related debt burdens. Here and there, Ganahl also notes the internal violence involved in such state-making and concomitant homogenization drives. Taken seriously, such insights might have prompted a more general question about the consequences of the imposition of the modern state in its various guises. In fact, critique of the World Bank discourse might have led to such a turn. Ganahl has chosen a different approach. As he posits, state formation in the “West” ultimately produced a relationship of “mutually advantageous dependence” between states and citizenry, while this did not happen in “Africa”. The reason Ganahl gives for this is basically the weak economic basis of states in “Africa”. Again, this is a rather wholesale argument when Ganahl points elsewhere to rents based on natural resource exploitation. One culprit he identifies is smallholder agriculture. In this, he disregards early independence drives and conflicts around the use of quite effective and productive sectors – such as cocoa in Ghana – for foreign exchange earnings in the interests of industrialization. Another pointer to much more complex issues is the well-known undercutting of effective agricultural production in many parts of “Africa” by the combined effects of crisis relief and subsidized food exports from North America and Western Europe.

Ganahl also offers solutions. Significantly, he does this in language that refers to what “we” might do, thereby casting himself and his readers into a kind of social engineering subject. One of his proposed solutions is to increase financial aid in order to compensate for economic weakness and foster an entrepreneurial class. Another avenue would be to “tap” the potential of “African” institutions, which he largely equates with chieftdom. As an example of both harnessing traditional institutions *and* marginalizing chiefs politically, Ganahl draws on the more optimistic strand of Botswana-related literature. Whatever its actual merits, the question remains as to how this experience might be applied to the quite incomparable complexity of “Nigeria” (244). Again, despite the indiscriminate talk about “Africa” throughout most of his argument, the author ultimately takes note of pervasive contingency and the need for a case-by-case approach. The obvious contradiction is left for the reader to detect. One might be reminded of the work by Ulrich Menzel and Dieter Senghaas in the 1980s in an array of case studies on “developmental history”. Significantly, these instructive studies did not endorse the idea apparently inherent in Ganahl’s reasoning that “development” is something that can be universalized around the world.

Ganahl has clearly undertaken to do far too much in this book – to analyse state structures in a very complex “subcontinent” (as he calls it), to contrast this with the advent of the modern state in the “West” and to find solutions that go beyond the usual fix informed by World Bank approaches. Such an overstretch is also apparent in quite mundane inadequacies, such as major omissions in the bibliography, including works to which entire special sections are devoted. The lack of care and thoughtfulness is also betrayed by the appearance of the “common man” and “his” concern (220, 238) in a day and age when some of us hope to have moved beyond such androcentric thinking and talking.

■ Reinhart Kößler